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ABSTRACT

A total of 100 children from divorced and separated families were compared with 100 children from intact families in this investigation of ways in which children handle the concepts of family membership and relationships. Children were given two social and two physical tasks: a family identity task; Piaget's interview for determining the definition of a family; standardized questions about the judgment of right and left relations; and conservation problems involving the transformation of clay balls. Grouped by age, subjects were between 3 and 12 years old. Findings indicated that cognitive development was unaffected by family dissolution. Consistent with Piagetian theory, age was statistically significant at the .0001 level for each task. No other differences were found. Over half the children in the two youngest age groups did not include their noncustodial fathers as members of their families. Mid-level children grounded their inclusion or exclusion of noncustodial parents in those parents' intentions to continue or not continue being a parent. Children between 9 and 12 maintained the constancy of identity of family members and included noncustodial fathers as family members. Stage increases in family tasks were accompanied by stage increases in physical tasks. It is concluded that a Piagetian approach to understanding family concepts may clarify some difficulties children have in understanding divorce and separation. (RH)

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IDENTITY CONSTANCY: A COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENTAL ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF FAMILY IDENTITY AND DIVORCE

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If we are to anticipate children's reactions to separation and divorce in order to help them negotiate the alterations in living arrangements associated with family dissolution, we must first learn how children understand family relationships and family membership when one parent no longer resides with the child. To address this problem, it seemed instructive to start the investigation by questioning children from intact families for this is the family situation that children have experienced up until the moment that they are faced with the separation or divorce of their parents. The results of this first study of children from intact families, presented here several years ago, found that these children's concepts of family membership and relationships in the context of divorce followed a Piagetian sequence of cognitive developmental stages (Wynn and Brumberger, 1982). We approached the problem as a case of qualitative invariance, i.e.,that the identity of family members as mother, father, sister or brother, is an invariant property which can not be altered by spatial and temporal transformations. We

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discovered that the development of children's ability to maintain the constancy of identity of family members in the context of divorce was, unlike other qualitative invariances, not a preoperational achievement. Because it appears to be based on an understanding of relationships, in this case blood-relationships, the constancy of identity of family members is consistent with Piaget's view of cognitive development that places an understanding of family concepts in the operational period (Piaget, 1928).

Today, we would like to present a study that is a continuation of that original work. Building on our previous efforts which served to delineate the developmental stages, the present study included children from divorced or separated families and compared them with children from intact families. Before proceeding to the data, it will be well to discuss in a few words the rationale for this second study and the method we adopted. While we had gained some insight into how children from intact families understand divorce, we realized that it might bear no relation to what they would think if they were to experience the dissolution of their own families. On the other hand, we did not believe that we were only assessing a hypothetical problem, for the incidence of divorce has so increased as to suggest that children have gained some familiarity with its consequences from friends and schoolmates. Nonetheless, we knew little about how children handle the concepts of family membership and relationships in the face of

the real life alterations in living arrangements associated with divorce. We recognized that our earlier findings might bear no relationship to how children process real life events and that the children who have experienced the departure of one parent from the home might structure their thought differently.

We replicated the original study, this time questioning 100 children from divorced or separated families as well as 100 children from intact families. The children ranged in age from three to twelve years and for purposes of analysis were grouped by age into five groups with ten boys and ten girls in each of the age and family type groups. All children were volunteers whose parents responded to letters explaining the study. The children were caucasian and came from homes classified as middle class according to the Hollingshead Four Factor Index of Social Status.

We presented the children with four tasks: a family identity task which we designed and three established procedures; Piaget's interview for determining the definition of a family, the standardized version of questions concerning the judgment of right and left relations and conservation problems involving the transformation of clay balls. The same test battery as was used in the first study to determine stage definitions was included for the purpose of investigating whether divorce or separation had any deleterious consequences for cognitive development in general. By pairing the two social tasks with two tasks relating to physical knowledge, identity and relations could be assessed

in both domains.

Description of the three established tasks seems unnecessary as you are probably familiar with them, but description of the family identity task may be helpful. The family identity task consists of six problems designed to test the child's ability to maintain the constancy of identity of mother, father, sister or brother, each in two situations in which a spatial transformation occurs; one related to daily occupation out of the home and the other related to leaving the family home to live in a new house because of divorce. The statement of each problem is visually represented by the presentation and manipulation of cutout figures. The first three items were patterned after a procedure used by Sigel, Saltz and Roskind (1967) in which, for example, a figure is moved from a group of mothers to a group of school teachers and the child is asked if the figure is still a mother. The last three items deal with divorce. For example, the child is told, " This is Main Street with eight houses on it. In this house live a mother and a father and their two children, a brother and a sister. The mother and father fight a lot, and because they don't want to fight anymore they decide to get a divorce, so the father moves to a new house. Is he still a father?" and "Why?"

Two scores were derived for the family identity task one for the occupational situation and the other for the divorce situation. Therefore five measures were considered in the analysis. All the tasks were scored on a seven-point scale such

that the same score represented the same cognitive level on each task. Interrater reliability ranged from 73% to 98% on a random selection of half of the protocols.

Multivariate analysis of variance was used to examine differences among the family type by age by sex groups. The scores for the five tasks were entered as the dependent variables. The most important finding appears to be that cognitive development remains unaffected by the real life experience of family dissolution as there was no significant multivariate main effect for family type. Although the interaction of age and family type was significant, it does not support the existence of a cognitive deficit. On the one hand, five- and six-year-old children from intact families attained higher scores on the conservation task than their agemates from divorced families, and, on the other hand, the five- and six-year-olds from divorced families had higher scores on judgments of left and right relations. This is not easily explained and may be simply an anomaly of the data.

There was a significant mulitvariate main effect for age which is consistent with Piagetian theory. Univariate analyses indicated that age was statistically significant at the .0001 level for each of the tasks. There were no other differences. From the point of view of understanding alterations in the family due to divorce, this suggests that in spite of parental explanations to the contrary and visits with the nonrustodial parent, young children believe that a parent who lives out of a

child's home is no longer a parent, and, that a child no longer has a parent when that parent does not live with the child. Parental identity is based on location and/or role, and can be restored only temporarily by visiting. This Level Two thinking characterized the majority of children (62%) between the ages of three and eight on the identity task and was validated by the responses of the younger children in the divorced and separated group to the questions, "How many people are in your family?" and "Who is in your family?" Over half of the children in the two youngest age groups did not include their noncustodial fathers as members of their families. The inability to restructure family relationships may be the reason that young children are so distressed by the consequences of divorce and separation. Comparatively few researchers have adopted a Piagetian framework for the study of the effects of divorce, although some attention has been focused in the literature on the young child's egocentrism and feelings of guilt. While anecdotal references to guilt pervade the psychoanalytic literature dealing with divorce and young children, it was somewhat surprising that only one child mentioned in the interviews that the daddy had gone away because the children had been bad.

Children at Level Three maintained identity by attributing to the absent parent intentionality through love to continue being a parent. Even though Piaget (1928) never mentioned love in his study of the definition of a family, he recognized this type of relation which he called the motive for action, or the

psychological relation, allowing that children distort reality in accordance with their desires and their romancing.

Children between nine and twelve years of age had a much better grasp of blood-relationships and were able to maintain the constancy of identity of family members. They also included their noncustodial fathers as members of their families.

Stage increases in the family tasks were accompanied by stage increases in the other tasks. The scores of all of the measures were significantly correlated with each other and with age level indicating age increases are accompanied by regular increases in cognitive performance. There was, however, clear evidence of a physical-social decalage. The scores were categorized as either preoperational (Levels One to Four) or concrete operational (Levels Five to Seven) and frequency counts were entered into contingency tables. The Chi Square tests for each pair of tasks were significant. Over all, there were few exceptions to stage constancy, but those that existed indicated that children learned to apply concepts of constancy of identity and relationships to the physical domain prior to the social domain. This was somewhat surprising for the children who had real life experience with family dissolution, because we had suspected that the increased attention to family matters might have increased their awareness of family concepts.

In conclusion, it appears that a Piagetian approach to understanding family concepts may clarify some of the difficulties that children have in understanding divorce and

separation. For the clinician, our task gives children permission to discuss family dissolution in an objective manner and allows the clinician to interact with children at their cognitive level. Family concepts based as they are on blood-relationships, are very like sexuality, a topic often avoided by parents in discussions with young children.

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Revised Scoring - 1986

Family Identity

Level 1: Lacks comprehension of the transformations. Gives irrelevant, don't know, or inadequate answers usually based on love and desire in which the child's egocentrism attributed to someone else what they want and/or their own point of view.

Level 2: The child shows comprehension of the transformation and may either maintain or deny identity based on their perspective. Answers often contain irrelevant, don't know or inadequate aspects, however, identity is essentially based on location and/or on role and is not constant.

A: If based on location then a family member's identity is derived from his/her location in or out of the home and a change in location requires a change in identity.

B: If based on role then the family member's availability to perform a role is paramount and role confusion may result if the absent family member is not there to do the job he/she is supposed to do.

Level 3: Identity is either maintained or denied depending on perspective of the child, but is done so by attributing to the absent parent the parent's intentionality through love and/or desire to continue being a father or mother. The response clearly indicates that location and role are not the important aspects of fatherness or motherness, but a more adequate explanation than that of intentionality is not available.

Level 4: Transitional. Classification confusion in which the child begins to dissociate the more permanent qualities of membership from the more variable qualities of role and location but in which confusion still exists and a less adequate explanation than that of membership is utilized. The child may use terms suggestive of relationship understanding but which are essentially facades behind which little if any substance exists. The child may equate the spouse role with parental identity and there is often a misunderstanding of the legalities of divorce.

Level 5: Maintained family identity with concrete explanations based on class membership in a family.

Level 6: Transitional: Family identity maintained, based essentially on a true understanding of blood relationships but with an incomplete explanation. The explanation may contain some confused elements of responsibility, biological necessity and/or role function.

Level 7: Maintained family identity with adequate explanation based on blood relationships. Explanation may include a distinct description of role function as part of a

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Level 2: The child shows comprehension of the transformation and may either maintain or deny identity based on their perspective. Answers often contain irrelevant, don't know, or inadequate aspects, however, identity is essentially based on location and/or role and is not constant.

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B: If based on role, then the family member's availability to perform a role is paramount and role confusion may result if the absent family member is not there to do the job he/she is supposed to do.

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Level 7: Maintained family identity with adequate explanation based on blood relationships. Explanation may include a distinct description of role function as part of a coordinated system.